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ABSTRACT

This paper first gives an overview of the English teaching profession in Australia, contending that the contested nature of subject English is as old as its establishment as a proper study for university undergraduates in the late 19th century and its emergence as a recognizable school subject several decades later. The paper relates that recently, a special issue of the national journal, "English in Australia," was devoted to a discussion of professional teaching standards in which contributors examined the complex issues relating to the professional status of English teachers and which gave rise to the English/literacy SPIRT (Strategic Partnerships with Industry--Research and Training) research team to develop standards. According to the paper, from the first attempts to interpret the guidelines for developing a SPIRT project, the concept of "industry partner" was interpreted in terms of a democratic engagement with the profession. The paper states that three specific and diverse locations were identified as core research sites for the project: Victoria (Monash), Queensland (QUT), and Western Australia (Edith Cowan). It further informs that teachers serve as "expert panels" who furnish accounts of their teaching--their talk and their writing are a form of knowledge construction. The paper reports that so far a collection of 47 written, discussed, and revised narratives have been collected in which the teachers describe examples, or moments, of "good" teaching and provide comprehensive coverage of the English curriculum as defined in state and national curriculum standards frameworks. It discusses these teacher narratives and their role in the development of standards. Contains 25 references. (NKA)

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Setting Standards for English/Literacy Teachers:

Re-theorising a SPIRT Project After One Year

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The English teaching profession in Australia, as in England and North America, has a long history of struggle in accounting for both the nature of its disciplinary base and the nature of the professional knowledge and expertise which, day by day, English literacy teachers bring to their classrooms. The contested nature of subject English is as old as its establishment as a proper study for university undergraduates late last century and its emergence as a recognisable school subject several decades later. Curriculum historians (Green, 1993; Goodson and Medway, 1990; Brock, 1987) chart the roles of government instrumentalities, statutory curriculum committees and academic bodies in defining what should be taught and how it should be taught. The profession itself, through its state and national associations, has provided the forum in which the diversities and commonalities of English teaching across Australia have been debated and enacted.

The changing definitions and shifting understandings about the content and pedagogy of English can be seen in the themes and titles which, over the years, English teachers have given to their professional conferences and professional publications: *New Developments in the Teaching and Learning of English, The New English, English Teaching in Perspective, English in America, English for the English, English for the Rejected, Versions of English, Changing English, Bringing English to Order, What is English? English in Transition, The Way We See Ourselves, Claiming the Territory, English for the 80s, English for the 90s, English for the Twenty-first Century, Reimagining English, Wither English?, The Crisis in English Studies*. It is hard to believe that other professions suffer the same degree of epistemological uncertainty. And certainly it is not surprising that the profession itself has from its inception asked questions about the nature of its professional status and attempted to define its professional standing - initially through its state associations and, since 1965, through the national body.

Over 30 years ago, the poet A.D. Hope, the founding president of the national professional association (AATE), addressed this issue at an early national English teachers' conference:

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> I need to remind you...that the teaching of English is not yet a profession in the fullest sense of the word. You are, it is true, a corporate body whose object is to promote, improve and maintain the standards of the subject and the skill you profess; you have moved a long way from the days when I first entered your ranks, when associations of teachers seemed to many of us to be concerned more with trade union principles and aims than with professional ethics and standards, but even today we lack the main thing that marks out a true professional body...The chief mark of a profession is that it is responsible, and is recognised as responsible, for itself as the body to which the community entrusts its interests in one particular field....
>
> I think we can hardly say that this association, whatever its energy and ideals, whatever the respect it commands, is yet recognised in the community as the body responsible for expert advice and for saying what ought and ought not to be done by those who administer education in this country...That date will have been reached, I believe, on the day when this association becomes the recognised authority on the teaching of English, the day when the Minister for Education approaches it to conduct and plan research or to advise and devise a new syllabus of studies; it will be the day when the control and disciplinary power over qualifications and membership of the profession is in the hands of the profession itself (*English in Australia*, Number 5, August 1967).

Now while the visionary stance of A.D. Hope may have been forty years ahead of its time, his call to the profession to take control of both its disciplinary knowledge and its pedagogical content knowledge (to borrow Shulman's handy distinction) has engaged the national association since its inception, through the national journals, through national and state conferences and, since the early 80s, through formal position papers which have not only attempted to provide state-of-the-art accounts of English curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and English teachers' work, but have also attempted to define what "good" English teaching looks like and the features "which characterise the effective English classroom". (*The Teaching of English in Australia*, 1987).

More recently, a special issue of the national journal, *English in Australia* (No. 122, July 1998), was devoted to a discussion of professional teaching standards. The contributors examined the complex issues relating to the professional status and knowledge of English teachers, resisting the notion that seemingly simple solutions could be found in either recent generic standards documents or in disciplinary-specific models from other countries, such as those of the NBPTS. It is from within this continuing tradition that the English/Literacy SPIRT research team has read and responded to recent national and international work in developing professional teaching standards, prompting the team to situate its research within both the actual circumstances which have shaped, and continue to shape, English teaching in Australia and the complex and at times conflicting debates in which the profession has engaged. And it is this historical and cultural context which initially shaped, and now modifies, the original aims and design of our particular SPIRT project. From our first attempts to interpret the Guidelines for developing a SPIRT project, the concept of "industry partner" was interpreted in terms of a democratic

engagement with the profession. The precise nature of the relationship between chief investigators and industry partners was interrogated and problematised. (A point we return to later on.)

A further historical factor shaped the SPIRT team's approach to the research design for the project. It would be equally reductive to posit one continuous history of the English teaching profession, without acknowledging the fact that the professional culture of English teachers differs significantly from state to state. The studies of Brock (1987) and Green and Beavis (1996) have documented both diversity and difference across state borders, even where recent national curriculum profiling exercises have sought to achieve some kind of curriculum settlement.

AATE, is a quintessentially Australian federation, as to a lesser extent is our partner primary association, the Australian Language and Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA). These peak bodies, comprising state/territory delegates, provide a forum, and at times a battleground, for vigorous debates about the relationship between state associations and the national body. At its best the national bodies provides the site where English literacy teachers from around the country can compare their diverse experiences and perspectives, as they grapple with the policy and curriculum environments in their respective states, as well as the policy directives emerging from DETYA under the guiding hands-on hands of Dr David Kemp.

A prior principle, therefore, informed our research team's first plans. Any standards for the profession should arise out of this local diversity without pretending to contain it; and any attempt to conceptualise general statements of principle about teaching standards should affirm concrete instances or experiences of the profession, while ensuring that those statements of principle spoke to specific school communities.

We therefore identified three specific and diverse locations as core research sites for the project: Victoria (Monash), Queensland (QUT) and W.A. (Edith Cowan). This multi-site design has allowed us to remain conscious of significant differences in the culture of English teachers across Australia and, indeed, the diversity of the work of our panels of teachers across these states has confirmed the wisdom of this plan.

The two English literacy associations (AATE and ALEA), who on paper are our major industry partners, are doing much more than providing us with an infrastructure to facilitate our research. At a practical level they have developed the set of criteria which were used to identify the sixty exemplary English/literacy teachers who currently comprise the four teacher panels meeting in Victoria and Queensland. More broadly, the range of initiatives which the associations continue to take in the areas of advocacy, publications, research and professional development, are significant moments in the profession's attempts to define itself. This simultaneously gives rise to a narrative about the way the profession has gone about making itself and a more sociological account which focuses on the institutional contexts of that making: the tensions between structure and agency inevitably exposing the complex social organisations and relationships which determine and shape teachers' work.

With this in mind, it was also clear to the research team that the employing authorities should, from the inception of the project, have a voice in its operation. Professional teaching standards cannot be formulated apart from the institutional contexts in which teachers live and work and which shape their professional lives and their sense of what is possible. Standards cannot be miraculously handed down to either the professional associations or to future certifying authorities as complete in themselves. Standards statements can be achieved only by acknowledging the ways in which external bodies already define the nature and scope of teachers' work - as the research of Connell (1985), Hargreaves (1994) and Huberman (1993) remind us. Governmental standards council bodies in our three core states were therefore invited, and readily agreed, to join the two professional associations as additional industry partners. It might be more accurate, therefore, to describe the industry partnership as a consortium. It is certainly true that the engagement of these bodies has enriched the work of the project during its first year of operation.

A further point might be made regarding the nature of this particular researcher/industry partnership. The chief investigators share a history of extensive involvement in the national association which together extends over something like 30 years. This allows us to position ourselves alongside teachers as members of the association, sharing a common concern about our professional status as English literacy teachers. Marie Emmett, a former president of ALEA and Victorian steering committee member, shares as similar relationship with ALEA.

This does not mean that the tensions which commonly characterise relations between academic researchers and practising teachers have been swept aside. To the contrary, at a recent teacher panel meeting, Meredith Maher, a teacher participating in our project, challenged the way Brenton, at a recent invitational forum of academics and bureaucrats in Brisbane, had represented, and in her view, privileged, certain episodes in the Victorian teachers' panel discussions. The teachers we are working with are more than the source of our data, more than the "expert panels" who will identify and validate standards statements. The reports to the profession at conferences and in the national journal by the association presidents represent the project as characterised by a high degree of teacher ownership: it is *their* project. And if traces of conflict between traditional, academic research (the research which gets valorised by ARC grants and refereed journals) and teachers' knowledge should appear in our work (and it would be surprising if they did not, given that SPIRT is a type of ARC grant), the project team expects to be sufficiently reflexive to take them into account.

The collaborative work with the teacher panels has, this year, formed the matrix of our research. The teachers accounts of their teaching are far more than a source of information about their work. They are occasions where these teachers come together, outside school time, to talk about their professional lives. Yet such phrasing - that they come together to talk "about" their professional lives - does not capture the quality of their involvement. Their talk and their writing are a form of knowledge construction (Barnes and Todd, 1977; Mercer, 1996; Mishler, 1991), not simply talk 'about' what they

know and do (as though the knowing and doing can simply be posited as existing out there, for all to see), but a significant enactment of that knowing and doing. The NBPTS model of professional standards includes the propositions that "Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience", and that "Teachers are members of learning communities" (Pence: 1998:57). The teacher panels enact such 'self reflection' by the very fact of their coming together to engage in this project. It was the nature of the teachers' engagement that prompted us to examine more closely what exactly was happening at these meetings, opening up the first opportunity for retheorising our research.

BRENTON

Bahktin (1981) remarks that the speaker's intentions in any conversation or dialogue complicate the path between a word and its object. Our words are always imbued with our meanings; they never simply name objects in the "real" world, but provide a space in which a variety of meanings blend and clash. For Bahktin, words "sparkle" because they are ideological - they are a site of contestation and difference, rather than neutral labels for things out "there". Because the teachers involved in the project bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences to the narratives they have written and to the panel discussions, the meetings have involved grappling with words and meaning in precisely this kind of spirit.

Over the past month we have been reading the teachers' narratives about their teaching practice, and discussing their significance as stories about exemplary practice. In the background here is the extensive literature on "cases" (Shulman, 1992) - indeed, we occasionally slip into commonsensical questions of the kind which Shulman asks: "What is this a case of?" Yet, at the teacher panel meetings, while some teachers might agree about the point of a particular narrative, others will dissent from their reading, and offer, in fact, strongly resistant readings. These disagreements are just as significant as any consensus about good practice and such disagreements cannot be explained in Shulman's terms merely as "differences of opinion". These accounts of teaching are part of a shifting play of meaning, a contestation over words and values, reflecting the variety of school communities in which these teachers work, as well as differences in their professional histories. Our "cases", finally, are not cases "**about**" anything. The path between them (to borrow from Bahktin) and the circumstances and events they describe is too complicated for us to suppose that they can ever provide simplistic data of this sort.

What do these teacher-authored accounts comprise? So far we have a collection of 47 written, discussed and revised narratives in which the teachers describe examples, or moments, of "good" teaching. These narratives have been collected from a range of sites in Victoria and Queensland and describe classroom events from Grades 3 to Year 12. They provide comprehensive coverage of the English curriculum as defined in state and national curriculum standards frameworks. They include accounts of work in ESL classrooms, "Special English" classrooms, and work with indigenous students. Many of the stories involve sophisticated framing devices (MacLachlan and Reid), opening up several levels of interpretation for the reader or listener. In the following illustration, "A

cloze encounter of the poetic kind" a teacher begins her account of teaching Year 12 poetry by foregrounding her own academic values. The pun in the title signals the textual status of the story which follows:

> Many of the best moments in my teaching centre on words, their shades of meaning and discovering ways of making sense, whether the focus be metaphors or allusions in Year 12, or Greek derivations in Year 7. In so many ways, words underpin for me what English teaching is about, for it is through our focus on words and their patterning that we are able to shape and refine our sense of meaning.

Other stories expose the fine grained complexities with which the skilled teacher manages and makes judgements about student learning in difficult interactive/overactive environments. A Year 7 ESL teacher repositions her own pedagogical content knowledge:

> I have come to see that more routine and structured tasks also have a role. I now know that part of the struggle to be an effective ESL teacher involves putting aside my own teaching and learning preferences to work with and extend on the strategies the ESL students bring with them to the Australian classroom.

Yet other teachers create the immediacy of a teaching episode employing the deceptively simply stylistic device of a "ripping yarn":

> So, with fear and trembling, I gritted my teeth and went ahead with it. These were the 10 students who were not aiming to go on to tertiary studies and couldn't make head or tail of Shakespeare on a good day, but who expected that I would have something better for them...They wanted 'practical stuff', they told me, not school stuff that wasn't going to do them any good.
>
> This began to have a huge bearing on the way I fronted up to these kids...

By writing their stories, these teachers are engaging in complex textual practices, producing a variety of texts across a range of genres that mediate their knowledge and experience. When that complexity is matched by our reading of these texts - and as any good teacher of language and literacy will tell you, meaning cannot be said to reside "within" texts, but is only generated through our reading of them - you have something which approximates to the complexities of teaching and the vast array of professional judgements that teaching entails. This has prompted us to ask sharper questions than our original research plan posed:

- How do we assign status to each text in terms of its representation of the teacher's professional experience? (i.e. on what basis do we privilege one narrative over another?)
- How do we choose which multiple readings we believe are legitimate and which are deviant?

The narratives are clearly open to a range of interpretations, depending, for example, on the order in which they are read, and the ways in which they can be juxtaposed with one another. This experience has prompted us to interrogate further the way stories, or "case studies", are often used in the professional standards literature. We are thinking especially of those sanitised vignettes in the Australian Teaching Council's *National Competency Framework for Beginning Teachers* (1996). In the introductory panel meetings, we, in fact, provided the participating teachers with samples of these vignettes, as a possible model for writing about their professional lives; they chose to write in other forms.

This is not a matter of English teachers wanting to think of themselves as creative or anarchic (one thinks of the appalling Robin William's in the film "The Dead Poets' Society" standing on a chair and declaiming: "O Captain, My Captain!"). There will obviously be dimensions to English literacy teachers' knowledge and expertise which cause them to engage in a standards-setting exercise in a fundamentally different way from (say) Maths or Science teachers. As English teachers, they have strong views about language and meaning, and it would be strange if they did not treat any text - including standards documents and stories which claim to present exemplary practice - as an occasion for interpretation and debate.

Thus these teachers' textual practices when writing and reading their stories reflect more than idiosyncratically "English" habits of mind. They raise important methodological questions which go to the heart of the standards movement. They suggest significant differences between first and second wave standards-setting as characterised by Louden (1999) and Delandshere and Petrosky (1994), that is, between bureaucratic attempts to introduce generic standards and the current move to formulate subject -specific standards. We do not have time to tease these issues out in this presentation, but offer several assertions.

An exemplary narrative can never be summed up by a neat little moral, nor can it provide a one-dimensional exemplar or even a cluster of good teaching practices. How, then, can we be expected to take stories like the vignettes in the *National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching* seriously? In following Louden's (1999) concept of 'second wave' standards, we are attempting to arrive at a number of statements of principle on the basis of the teachers' talk and the stories they have shared.

These narratives, however, cannot be posed as simple illustrations of those principles. Teachers at recent panel meetings have explored the possibilities of distilling the narratives into key principles for English literacy teaching in the way that Louden suggests. The teachers can indeed develop cogent taxonomies of what 'good practice' looks like, and it is no surprise that this results in overarching categories congruent with those that bodies such as the NBPTS, or the Standards Council, derive. ('creating a learning environment', 'content knowledge', 'classroom management and organisation' etc.) The teachers have also, in questioning the adequacy of these derivations, experimented with alternative formations which deliberately use the first person plural:

"We believe that good practitioners...are reflective about their craft and in their classrooms...enthuse, engage and motivate their students etc." The 'we' is used deliberately to underline the fact that these are principles which the profession is committed to upholding - that, at least, is how they felt this particular genre was supposed to work rhetorically.

This work is exploratory; next year we expect the panels to engage in a more sustained manner in formulating a set of principles for other teachers to scrutinise. However, although the teachers are confident about arriving at such statements of principle, they remain convinced that such general reflections should remain grounded in the narratives and discussions they have held. Just as a good narrative embodies a play between the specific circumstances and events which it describes, and the general reflections that it occasions, so the teachers' stories resist blanket categorisation, even as we try to generalise from them to statements of principle about good English teaching. We are committed to formulating key principles of English literacy teaching, but those principles must exist in a dialectical relationship with the specific events and circumstances which they describe.

Louden and Wildy (1998) argues in another paper, that much of the work on professional standards reflects a common-sense understanding of a standard as an "ideal type, a fixed point from which all other performances can be distinguished", as though there exists an ideal type or object of which all other objects are an imperfect approximation . Our research points beyond this sort of Platonic logic to a more complex understanding of the relationship between general principles or categories and concrete experience. It is difficult to see how one can come up with a satisfactory description of the context - specific nature of performance, when one is working with the logic of 'essence' and 'variation', a logic which inevitably positions the variation in a problematical way, as an unsatisfactory copy or inferior version of the 'essence'. If we are to formulate principles or standards of performance for English literacy teachers, we will need to think of other ways in which to conceptualise the specific instance in relation to the general principle.

The logic of 'essence' and 'variation' works against any satisfactory formulation of the context-specific nature of any performance. Professional standards have no real meaning apart from the situations in which they are realised; they only emerge at the intersection between the personal qualities and beliefs of the teacher and the specific circumstances (the policy and curriculum environment at a particular school; the socio-cultural character of the school community) in which the performance occurs. Much of the standards literature (especially first wave standards) positioned teachers as discrete subjects whose abilities or qualities somehow inhered within their individual psyches and performances - the psychologistic language of testing and ability. We are looking at a conceptualisation of 'standards' as involving a language of intersubjectivity, an alternative understanding of our professional identity, that is firmly grounded in specific school communities. This opens up the issue of the uneasy relationship between standards for professional development purposes and standards for certification.

Reviewing the standards movement in the United States, Pence notes that it has been driven by "a rhetoric of crisis, failure, and accountability" (1998:56). Even though the NBPTS represented a significant response to the Reagan government's attempts to undermine the status of teachers and run down public schooling, its work has inevitably been shaped by the conservative political climate out of which it has emerged. W.A. English teachers who were invited to explore the applicability of the US standards to the Australian scene criticised the material as culturally loaded, reflecting middle class attitudes and values (Brown and Chadbourne, 1998). Reports by both Pence and Petrosky on the standards experience in the U.S. reveal a tension between the role of standards for individual career advancement and the professional dialogue and collegiality which was a feature of the NBPTS's early work, when it originally sought to develop subject-specific standards.

In conceptualising this project, we have understood the formulation of professional standards for English literacy teachers as a means of describing 'our knowledge', embracing 'our' history as a profession. Even the use of the first person plural is a way of signalling a contrasting perspective to the individualisation and fragmentation of the profession projected by David Kemp's (1996) grand vision of "Schools and the Democratic Challenge". Kemp's vision of schooling does not require the development of professional 'standards': excellent teaching is simply drilling and skilling students so that they perform well on standardised tests, allowing your school to compete with others for its market share.

In resisting this kind of conservative rhetoric, a primary aim of the project is to conceptualise a larger sense of our professional identity, one that involves collaboration and continuing professional development. We see ourselves as promoting teacherly reflection with reference to an agreed set of principles, a deep understanding of the complexities of teachers' work, and continuing research into teaching and learning. We wish to promote the value of teachers talking with one another, opening their teaching up to scrutiny, and working in teams. Rather than accepting the impoverished version of ourselves which David Kemp aims to impose on us, we wish to tap a deeper order of professional awareness that points beyond prevailing social and economic forces.

Pence and Petrosky both affirm the process of developing professional standards while remaining fairly critical of the standards themselves and the way they have been implemented by the NBPTS. By distinguishing between the process of developing professional standards and the product (the text of the standards and the elaborate procedures for certification), these writers encourage us to consider alternative ways of envisioning standards to the form in which they are conceptualised in NBPTS documents and practices.

Many of the participants in our panels have described the discussions and the writing they have done as "some of the best professional development ever" (that is a quote), which we see as a stronger claim than merely saying that the activities have been professionally rewarding, regardless of whether we can ultimately formulate standards and provide exemplars that have credibility with the profession. By writing stories and then

discussing these narratives with each other, the panel members have experienced a process which is arguably far more valuable than any set of examples of good teaching could ever be.

As we enter the second year of the project, we therefore find ourselves profoundly sceptical about developing a reified set of standards that might be used to judge an individual teacher's performance. The stories which the teachers have written cannot be used to objectify professional standards in some kind of uncomplicated way for all to see. Rather than reaching this kind of completeness, we see our work as remaining open-ended and perhaps incomplete, part of a continuing process of definition and redefinition, reflection and critique grounded in teachers' knowledge and practice. We have begun to experiment with the production of hypertextual 'web cases' in which teacher narratives, commentaries, evaluations, statements of standards, teacher discussions and student work and comment are hot-linked and use a range of print, sound and video modes. We envisage that the profession might add to these web documents thus constituting a product that remains permanently open, resisting the temptation to sign off on behalf of future members of the profession.

Our goal is to bring a wider circle of teachers into the conversation, enabling them to explore the questions of value and interpretation with which we have been grappling. This should be a contiuning discussion for the profession generally. It might be the single most important outcome of our work.

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